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Jokers don't kid around with helicopter safety

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12th Combat Aviation Brigade Public Affairs Office

KATTERBACH, Germany – Every H-60 model aircraft in the U.S. military was recently grounded due to a mechanical issue found in the tail assembly, specifically with the tail rotor intermediate gearbox.

For the pilots and crew with C Company “Jokers,” 3-158th Assault Helicopter Battalion, 12th Combat Aviation Brigade, and attached to Task Force Quickstrike at Grafenwohr Training Area, this was no laughing matter.

“The gearbox is saying it is full but really it is not. The fluid inside is burning out, and the gauge that shows how much is inside it isn’t working right,” said Pfc. Nathan Cook, a UH-60 Blackhawk crew chief with the Jokers and native of Cincinnati, Ohio.

According to a message published by Redstone Arsenal to all Army commanders; active, Reserve and National Guard, “Investigation of a recent accident revealed the failure of the Tail Rotor (TR) Intermediate Gearbox due to lack of lubrication. At this time it is believed the failure was due to a manufacturing quality escapement which resulted in a lack of lubrication within the Gearbox. A follow-on message to include inspection, correction, requisition, and disposition instructions will be issued as the investigation continues.”

That message required the status of all aircraft with an Intermediate Gearbox with less than 100 Hours Time Since New (TSN) or Time Since Overhaul (TSO) to be changed to be Red //X//. This message resulted in the initial grounding of all H-60 model aircraft until the inspection could be completed prior to their next flight.

“It is not so bad for us here,” said Sgt. Aaron Sullivan, another crew chief with C Co. “I would hate to be the guys (deployed).”

Sullivan pointed out that they have the facilities here in Germany to perform the inspections and replace the part if necessary but the units downrange may not have that option right away depending on where they are located, especially those in the middle of a mission.

Since the initial message, a new message was issued that reduced the TSN and TSO to 50 hours and cleared any aircraft where the last Overhaul was accomplished by the Corpus Christi Army Depot (CCAD).

Additionally, commanders are authorized to allow one flight of up to two hours to bring an aircraft back to home base or a facility capable of performing the inspection and repairs as necessary per their mission and situation. This gives some flexibility in ensuring critical missions can be completed and affected aircraft to be moved to better facilities.

Joker Soldiers handled the inspection with characteristic efficiency; despite the fact the grounding forced them to delay two missions.

“We focused first on those aircraft headed out for missions, then finished the rest,” said Sgt. 1st Class Mohammed Rafiq, platoon sergeant and maintenance supervisor with C Co., and native of Hayward, Calif.

Overall, the actual impact to the 12th CAB has been minimal, though three aircraft were identified as having IGBs that need replacing. The Griffin mission carries on.